

# Understanding senior abuse



Facts, Tips, Contacts.

## About this booklet

If you are a senior, this booklet is for you. If you have senior-aged friends, family members, or neighbours—or if you work with older adults—this booklet is for you, too. In other words, it's for everyone.

Abuse can happen to anyone. Some abusive behaviour is illegal; all abuse is wrong. Take a few minutes now to read the facts, learn the warning signs, and find out what you can do.

### **Know your options.**

The Government of Nova Scotia thanks the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children at The University of Western Ontario for permission to adapt material from their public education campaign, "It's Not Right! Neighbours, Friends and Families for Older Adults" ([www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca](http://www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca)). The original campaign was supported

© Crown copyright, Province of Nova Scotia, 2012

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce all or part of this publication for non-commercial purposes, as long as you cite the following source.

Nova Scotia Department of Seniors. Understanding Senior Abuse: Facts, Tips, Contacts. Halifax: Department of Seniors, 2012.

ISBN: 978-1-55457-475-9

Project lead: Jocelyn Yerxa

Writing: Joanne Wise

Design: Chris Bennett

This booklet and related resources are available online at [novascotia.ca/seniors](http://novascotia.ca/seniors)



## What's inside

Is it abuse? .....	2
What you can do if you suspect abuse .....	4
<b>SEE it!</b> Learn the warning signs .....	5
Overcome your hesitation to help .....	6
<b>CHECK it!</b> If it's safe, talk to the person who you think is being abused .....	7
Be prepared .....	7
What you can do to keep yourself safe from abuse .....	8
Stay involved. Know your rights .....	8
Pay attention to your finances .....	8
Learn about safety planning .....	9
Where to find help .....	10



## Is it abuse?

Older adults have the right to live safely and manage their own affairs. When someone violates those rights and causes harm, that's abuse. Often the abuser is someone in a position of trust, like a family member, friend, or caregiver.

Impolite behaviour or rudeness is not abuse. Arguments and conflicts are not abuse either. If both people have power in the relationship and can make choices about what happens next, then it is not necessarily an abusive situation.



It is **SEXUAL ABUSE** if somebody forces an older adult to engage in sexual activity. This may include verbal or suggestive behaviour, not respecting personal privacy, sexual touching, or sex without the person's consent.



It is **NEGLECT** if somebody fails to provide the necessities of life, such as food, clothing, a safe shelter, medical attention, personal care, and necessary supervision. Neglect may be intentional or unintentional. Sometimes the people providing care do not have the necessary knowledge, experience, or ability.



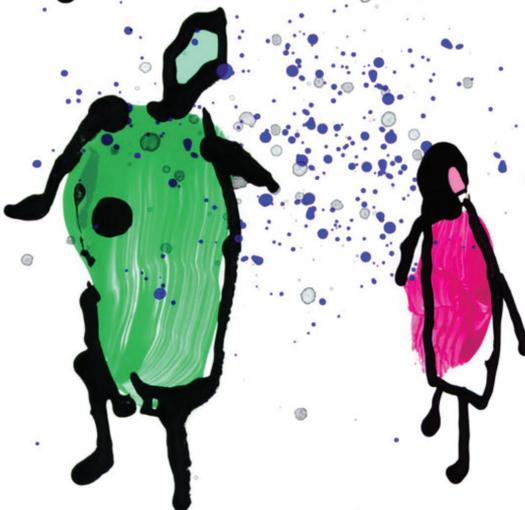
It is a **VIOLATION OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS** if somebody interferes with an older adult's ability to make choices, especially when those choices are protected under the law. Examples include interfering with spiritual practices or traditions, withholding mail or information, dictating how someone else can spend their own money, or keeping someone in an institution without a legitimate reason.

It is **EMOTIONAL ABUSE** if somebody threatens, insults, intimidates, or humiliates an older adult, treats the person like a child, or does not allow them to see their family and friends.

It is **FINANCIAL ABUSE** if somebody tricks, threatens, or persuades older adults out of their money, property, or possessions.

It is **PHYSICAL ABUSE** if somebody hits an older adult or handles the person roughly, even if there is no injury. Giving a person too much or too little medication, or physically restraining a person, are also forms of physical abuse.

If an older adult tells you they are being abused or hurt, believe them!



# What you can do if you suspect abuse

Everyone has the right to live without fear. We all have a role in making our communities safer and more respectful. Here are two things that neighbours, friends, and family members can do to help stop senior abuse:

1. **SEE it!** Learn the warning signs of abuse. Pay attention when something makes you uncomfortable. Overcome your hesitation to help.
2. **CHECK it!** Don't jump to conclusions. Talk privately with the person who you think is being abused. If you're not sure what to do, or if you need support, check with a professional.

Before you act, stop and ask yourself:  
What are the safety issues? Am I being respectful?

If the situation is dangerous, don't hesitate: call the police or 911.  
Trust your instincts. It is always better to be safe than sorry.



**SEE it!** Learn the warning signs

Here are some signs that a person might be abusing their power and trust in a relationship with an older adult:

- controlling what the older adult can do and who they can see
- blaming the older adult: *It's your fault that I pushed you!*
- a strong sense of entitlement: *I can do what I want!*  
*It's my inheritance!*
- treating the older adult like a child: *Do what I tell you!*
- frequent arguments, name calling, or threats
- leaving a dependent person alone for long periods of time

These are some signs that an older adult might be experiencing abuse:

- injuries, such as bruises, sprains, broken bones, or scratches—especially when the explanation does not fit the injury
- changes in behaviour, such as depression, withdrawal, or fear
- changes in regular social activity, such as missing religious or social events
- changes in living arrangements, such as previously uninvolved relatives or new friends moving in
- changes in financial situations, such as the cancellation of services (television, Internet, phone) or notices of unpaid bills
- things “disappearing” from the house
- signs of neglect, such as no food in the house, being left alone for long periods, or not having glasses, hearing aids, medications, or proper clothing

Trust your instincts when something makes you feel uncomfortable. A warning sign is like seeing the tip of an iceberg; there is likely much more going on below the surface.

# OVERCOME YOUR HESITATION TO HELP

## Concerns

## Points to Consider

**It's a private matter and none of my business.**

It is not a private matter when someone is being hurt. Abuse causes great harm. It's everyone's business.

**I don't know what to say.**

You can say that you care and are concerned. Listening is important, too.

**I might make things worse.**

Doing nothing leaves the person alone in a situation that may get worse if there is no help.

**I'm afraid the abuse will be directed to me or my family.**

Speak one-to-one with the person being abused, away from the person who might be abusive. Let the police know if you receive threats.

**I'm afraid the person being abused will be angry with me.**

The person may be angry, but will know you care enough to try.

**I'm afraid of getting involved.**

You can talk anonymously to a professional or a service provider.

**I want to maintain a relationship with both people.**

One person is being abused and is living in fear. Both people need help.

**CHECK it!** If it's safe, talk to the person who you think is being abused

- Wait for a time when you are alone and not likely to be interrupted.

- Describe what you saw or heard. Stick to the facts.

For example:

Do say what you saw.

"I saw him take money from your wallet."

Don't use judgmental language.

"I saw him stealing money from your wallet."

- Ask caring questions. Are you okay? Is someone hurting you? What do you want to do? How can I help?
- Be supportive and listen. Let them know that what is happening is not their fault.
- Encourage them to be their own advocate. Support them to make their own decisions.
- Respect their decisions, even when you don't agree. If you are concerned that they are unable to make informed decisions, ask for advice from a professional.
- Be patient. Leave the door open.

DO NOT confront or accuse the abusive person. They may take it out on the older adult.

### **Be prepared**

- Document any abuse that you see. Write down the date and what happened.
- Learn about safety planning—how to stay safe in a relationship and how to leave safely. (See page 9)
- Find out what local services are available in your area.
- Make sure that family caregivers have the resources and support they need.

# What you can do to keep yourself safe from abuse

## **Stay involved. Know your rights.**

Abuse happens to people of all ages from all walks of life. By staying involved with people and activities, you are less likely to be abused. Staying active and involved also helps you stay healthy. People in your community need you as much as you need them.

These are some things you can do to look after your physical and emotional health and well-being.

- Stay connected! Be in regular contact with people who support you and respect your decisions.
- Get involved! Find places in your community that offer activities and events where you can meet people.
- Reach out to others! Help to make a more caring community.
- Have fun! Do things that give you enjoyment, strength, and comfort.
- Stay physically active! Keep moving. Eat regularly and well.
- Get support! If you feel depressed, talk to a friend, faith leader, or social service agency in your community. You don't have to be alone with problems. Ask for help.

---

### REMEMBER...

You have a right to be treated with respect.

You have a right to be safe.

You have a right to make your own choices.

---

## **Pay attention to your finances**

Your peace of mind about financial security is important. Stay involved in and aware of what is happening with your money and belongings.

- If people are pressuring you in any way about your money or property, remind them that you have the right to make your own decisions even when they don't agree. Ask them to respect your choices.
- Think about your future. Consult a lawyer about future planning, powers of attorney, personal directives, caregiving arrangements, and your will. Share your plan and wishes with someone you trust.
- Open and send your own mail.
- Review your bank statements every month and contact the bank if you see anything unexpected.
- Keep your financial information and other important documents in a safe place. Tell someone you trust where to find the information.

### **Learn about safety planning**

If you are living in an abusive relationship, a safety plan can help you live more safely day to day. It can also help you to plan a safer way to make changes or leave the situation. Leaving is the most dangerous time in an abusive relationship, so it's important to plan well. **DO NOT** tell the abusive person about your plan.

A local shelter, police, or victim services office can help you create a good safety plan. Here are some basic steps:

- Arrange for regular home visits and telephone contact with friends, family, or service providers.
- Have emergency money and a prepaid phone card somewhere outside of the home.
- Give copies of important documents and keys to trusted friends or family members.
- Pack a bag of extra clothing, medicine, and personal aids (glasses, hearing aids, etc.)—whatever you would need to manage for a few days if you decide to leave. Give the bag to a trusted friend or family member.
- Keep phone numbers of friends, relatives, shelters, or other trusted individuals in a convenient place.
- Have a safety word that will let a trusted friend or family member know if you are in danger.

# Where to find help

If you or someone you know is being abused or neglected, help is available. Here are some resources in Nova Scotia.

## **911**

Call immediately if the situation is an emergency. Your call will be answered 24 hours a day.

## **Your local police**

Call your local police if the situation is not an emergency but you suspect it might be against the law. Ask to speak to someone who has been trained in senior abuse, or domestic/family violence.

## **211 Nova Scotia**

The Department of Seniors has partnered with the 211 telephone referral service. The 211 service will respond Senior Abuse Information and Referral phone calls. Call 211 for information on senior abuse, resources and services available to help, or to talk about a situation that is concerning you. Your call will be kept confidential except as required by law.

211 is an information and referral service that helps people navigate social and community services provided by all levels of government and non-government organizations in Nova Scotia. The service is free and offers multilingual, confidential service, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Dial 2-1-1 in Nova Scotia

1-855-466-4994 (toll-free outside Nova Scotia)

1-888-692-1382 (TTY)

[www.ns.211.ca](http://www.ns.211.ca)

## **Seniors' Safety Programs**

Many communities has a Seniors' Safety Program. The programs operate in partnership with local police agencies, including RCMP, municipal police or town police. Seniors' Safety Programs promote education and awareness about senior abuse, crime prevention, and safety and health issues. To find out about a program in your area, call 2-1-1 or check the Positive Aging Directory, published by the Nova Scotia Department of Seniors.

## **Legal Information Line and Lawyer Referral Service**

Call to learn about the law, the justice system, or how to find a lawyer in Nova Scotia.

1-800-665-9779 toll-free in Nova Scotia  
902-455-3135 in Halifax region

## **Adult Protection and Protection for Persons in Care**

Call if you know of a senior who is being abused or neglected and needs protection. Leave a message. All messages are returned.

1-800-225-7225 toll-free in Nova Scotia  
902-487-0640 out of province

The Department of Health and Wellness will investigate if either of these laws apply:

- Adult Protection Act—for adults who cannot physically or mentally protect or care for themselves
- Protection for Persons in Care Act—if the abuse happens in a licensed health facility, such as a nursing home, residential care facility, or hospital

---

Shelters are not just for younger women and their children. Older women can find support at a shelter, as well. Call 211 for information about temporary and emergency housing in your area. Remember:

- Shelters offer counselling, support, and safety planning over the phone, 24 hours a day.
  - You DO NOT have to be a shelter resident to get help and support.
  - You can choose not to give your name.
-

**Phone numbers:**

211 Nova Scotia

Dial 2-1-1 in Nova Scotia  
1-855-466-4994  
(toll-free outside NS)  
1-888-692-1382 (TTY)

Adult Protection and  
Protection for Persons in Care

1-800-225-7225 (NS)  
902-487-0640 (outside NS)

Legal Information Line  
and Lawyer Referral Service

1-800-665-9779 (NS)  
902-455-3135 (Halifax)

**Other numbers:**

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

